

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF R.K. NARAYAN- A SYNERGIC APPROACH

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Indian English Novel was born very humbly with Bankim Chander Chatterjee's *Raj Mohan's Wife* which was published serially in the Calcutta Weekly called *The Indian Field* in 1864. This novel appeared in the form of book posthumously in 1935. But it is second to none in quality and quantity. Indian English Novel has bagged many prestigious international awards in the last four decades. Several experiments in theme and form have been undertaken and many subgenres have also appeared in Indian English Novel.

Though *Rajmohan's Wife* is the first Indian novel in English, it is a mark of innovative and radical thematic approach. The first Indian English novel has dealt with a predicament of Indian woman in the male dominant society. But this novel did not find quality successors equally. There were some novels in English but they were characterised by imitation of British novels. The true turning point in Indian English Novel occurred by the emergence of the 'Big Three' – Raja Rao, Mulk Raj Anand and R.K.Narayan. These writers elevated Indian English novel to a very significant height. These contemporaries have adopted different creative sensibilities to represent India and Indians in their novels. Though the theme is common in some of their novels, the manner they have chosen to deal with it is varied from one another. They strengthened the foundation of Indian English novel with their creative outputs both in quantity and quality.

As is customary in Southern India, though now under western influence this has changed; one generally uses the name of one's village and that of one's father before one's name. R.K. Narayan's full name is Rasipuram Krishnaswami lyre Narayanaswami. R is for Rasipuram, a taluqa in the district of Salem in Tamilnadu, Narayan's ancestral village. Krishnanswami lyre is his father's name and Narayanaswami is his own name. R.K. Narayan has cut short even Narayan-swami and uses only Narayan. For the same reason all of Narayan's brothers have the same first two names R.K. His brothers' name was R.K. Laxman. Narayan was born on 10 October, 1906 in Madras which is now named Chennai. He was the third of eight surviving children. Soon after Narayan's birth his father was appointed headmaster in Government High School, Mysore. While other brothers and sisters of Narayan lived with their parents, he passed his childhood with his uncle and maternal grandmother Parvati, whom he called Ammani. His grandmother called him Kunjappa (the little one).

His grandmother was his first teacher. She taught him arithmetic, mythology, multiplication tables, the Tamil alphabet, Sanskrit slokas in praise of Goddess Saraswati and songs of classical melodies. He was allowed to have his dinner only after he had finished learning. In *My Days*, her strictness and passion is conveyed as follows, "Grandmotherhood was a wrong vocation for her; she ought to have been a school inspectress". (Narayan, 11) Not only was she 'a key figure' in the Narayan household, but also she became an epitome of all the grandmothers in the novels of Narayan. She is clearly the original of those robust, dry, temperamental old ladies who flourish in Narayan's fiction. She was the person who laid the deepest influence on his life.

He studied in various schools like Lutheran Mission School; CRC High School and Christian College High School in Madras before moving to Mysore. The Albert Mission School in his novels may be the fictional for Lutheran Mission School. At the age of twelve, he had participated in the Independence March organized by the school. He was reprimanded for this indulgence as such participations were prohibited in his home. He was fond of Charles Dickens, PG Wodehouse, Arthur Conan Doyle and Thomas Hardy during the school days. English was the language at home the benefit of which he got during his career of writing novels. He migrated to Mysore when his father was transferred to Maharaja's College High School, Mysore. He studied B.A in Maharaja's College but completed it only after four years. His desire to study M.A English was discouraged by a friend of him by stating that one would lose interest in literature in studying M.A in Literature. He worked as a teacher in a school but discontinued after he was asked to assist the Physical Education teacher. He decided to concentrate on creative writing by remaining at home. His first public writing was a book review. When he had visited his sister in Coimbatore in 1930, he saw a fifteen years old

girl called Rajam from the neighbourhood and fell in love with her at first sight itself. Amidst the mismatches of horoscope, he persuaded the girl's father and married her. They had a daughter called Hema. His wife died of typhoid when his daughter was just three years. It affected his mind for a very long time. This became the plot of his *The English Teacher*.

Narayan also worked for a Madras based news paper called *The Justice*. This paper was devoted for the cause of non-Brahmins. Though Narayan was a Brahmin, he joined it and worked for it. He launched his own paper called Indian Thought and with the help of his uncle he was able to get one thousand subscribers. This is used in the plot of *The Bachelor of Arts*. He sent his first novel *Swami and Friends* which was given to Graham Greene through his friend. It was rejected by a number of publishers but was published with the help of Graham Greene who helped him for the publication of his first four novels. Their friendship remained for a quarter century. His first novel was published in 1953 in the USA and his novels were published subsequently in the USA. He was appointed by the Government of Karnataka to write for the promotion of Tourism in Karnataka. He was nominated to the Rajya Sabha for his contribution to literature. He has spent the entire tenure of six years for the cause of school children. He fell ill and breathed his last on 13 May 2001. His demise was mourned by the lovers of novel all over the world.

Narayan has produced a sizable body of work – more than a dozen novels and several collections of short stories, number of travelogues, condensed versions of Indian epics in English and a memoir 'My Days'– which makes him one of the most respected novelists in the British Commonwealth. Over a period of forty years of composition he had built up a devoted readership throughout the world from New York to Moscow. His novels are characterized by Chekhovian simplicity. He was sometimes compared to the American author William Faulkner, whose novels were also grounded in compassionate humanism and celebrated the humor and energy of ordinary life in the town Yoknapatawpha. Narayan has created his fictional world (town) called Malgudi. Malgudi is the backdrop of all his novels. He has dealt with the life of students, teachers, printers, journalists, officers, painters, tourist guides, freedom fighters, poachers, taxidermists, tigers, lovers, bankers etc in his novels. He has exposed the practice of caste system, dowry system, widow tradition, superstitions, false-sagehood, and other typical Hindu Brahmin conventions in his narratives. His novels are mixture of romanticism, realism and satire. There is also a mixture of the social, political, cultural, spiritual aspects of average Indians in his novels.

Among his admirers the luminaries of the literary world like E.M. Forester, Graham Greene, Somerset Maugham, Pearl S. Buck, Henry Miller, V.S. Naipaul, Mulk Raj Anand, Santha Rama Rao, Khuswant Singh, Ved Mehta, etc.; who called him the 'novelist I admire the most'. Innumerable critics like K.R.S. Iyengar, C.D. Narasimhaiah, William Walsh; reviewers like John Updike, Shashi Tharoor and readers throughout the globe have given him sufficient critical attention. The University of Leeds was the first to confer upon him the degree of D.Litt. *Honouris Causa* in 1967, followed by Delhi University in 1973. A Sahitya Akademi Award and a *Padma Bhushan*, a literary prize for the *Best Asian Writer*, A.C. Benson medal by the Royal Society of Literature, a Soviet Award for literature, and many more, are a measure of the worldwide acknowledgment of his brilliance and accomplishment. In 1983, Narayan was elected Honorary Member of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the second Indian to be so honored. And from 1989 to 1995 he was a nominated member of the Upper House (Rajya Sabha). Twice his name was recommended for Nobel Prize but unfortunately it could not be conferred upon him during his life time. Literary circles often joke that the Nobel Committee ignored his works, mistaking them instead for self-help books due to their curious titles (*The English Teacher*, *The Painter of Signs*, etc.).

Narayan's writings rests on certain characteristic assumptions, which are basic to his world view and to his artistic practice. In his writings we find the concept of a stable universe underlying all human actions and evolutions. Indian English fiction is written in a language which is not the mother tongue of many Indian writers. It is also a fact that the novels are not in their mother-tongue about whom they are written. The description of various aspects of Indian life through a language which is not of Indian origin, is quite difficult. Narayan has attracted a large number of readers, writers and reviewers. As a writer of social novels, he has a light approach of life. He is generally realistic and photographic. His perception of the conflict between the present and the past is more detached and impersonal. He has received excellent response from E.M. Forster, Graham Green and William Walsh. In this connection M.K. Naik comment is worth quoting, "Narayan's is the art of quiet surfacing and self-landing, not of headlong diving or vertiginous take off. His characters are entrapped in, and discomfited by a variety of illusions, self-deception; and miscalculations and mischance. They are made to have strange assignations with a circumstantial world which is full of ambiguities and ironies." (Naik, 34)

An objective analysis of Narayan's characters reveals a definite journey of the self from innocence to experience and finally to wisdom. His moral instance makes his characters discard their jaundiced visions and realize the reality of things. Through frequent rise and fall, they move until their experiences culminate in wisdom. After many adventures and misadventures in life the characters return to the all pervasive reality of Malgudi. In all the works of literature, we find that author makes an attempt to fight against the process of dehumanization and he attempts to assert humanness. It is, in fact, unending search for identity which is going on from time immemorial and still continues. Like everyone else, a writer is interlinked with his world and he ought to have meaningful relationship with the world his writings belong to.

In a nutshell, R.K. Narayan's portrayal is realistic and authentic. The unfounded beliefs and irrational attitudes have come down to us from generation, and there is nothing uncommon about views and philosophy of life, the Hindus follow in their life. What is surprising is that they never question the validity of the Sashtras and puranas. The Hindu philosophy upheld therein along with myths and legends are accepted as they are. Moreover, if at all any one comes forward to denounce them, his attempts beat in vain on Indian's eternal passivity. He simply fails to withstand the collective force of the society. His total submission is looked upon as something traditionally good, serene and transcendental. His outlook is considered as matured when he accepts the traditional good of the society. This is what we find in most of the novels as suggestive of Narayan's bent of mind however detached he appears to be to the readers.

The basic theme of his novels is the place of man and his predicament in this universe. Narayan himself has remarked in an article that "The mood of comedy, the sensitivity to atmosphere, the sensitivity to atmosphere, the probing of Psychological factors, are the necessary ingredients in fiction." He wants to suggest that life is illogical' and man is always trying to translate his fantasies into reality. So, through the reversal of fortune, Narayan completes the story of man's rise and fall and thus presents a complete view of life, Narayan is realistic, but his realism is different from the surface realism of the French Naturalists. He does not see the ugly side of reality. Extreme crudities, names sex descriptions and cruelties are ignored by him. He portrays the seamy side of reality. His situations and characters are realistic, and so is his language and style. The life which he describes is put before us with a wealth of detail and accuracy.

Narayan's characters are primarily men whereas women occupies secondary place. He has created a beautiful spectrum through which women can be seen from several points of view. He has acquired a definite place in the history of world fiction on account of his sustaining vitality and consistency of visions. The heroines of Narayan's novels are flimsy. He has himself revealed this fact in his interview with Onlooker: 'Why was it he had no heroines but heroes in his novels?' Narayan corrected Onlooker: 'I have no heroes, only non-heroes and of course no heroines'. It is because he finds women determined, patient and self controlled. Their life is controlled by set of rules and regulations and they are basically clearheaded, at least in the small town world of his novels and short stories. Men have an inclination to fumble and become not reliable as Narayan could observe through his insight in human beings and they are usually uncertain. He found women more stereotyped than men. However some heroines are very impressive and enchanting. He has depicted contrast characters. One who is traditional and deep rooted in Hindu culture appears in his early novels - Swami's mother and Grandmother (Granny) are tradition - abiding, self- complacent, habitually very obedient, cooperative, traditionalist and passive women. Chandran's mother in *The Bachelor of Arts*, Savitri and Janamma in *The Dark Room*, Srinivas's wife and Sampath's wife in *Mr. Sampath*, Margayya's wife in *The Financial Expert*, Raju's mother in *The Guide*, Nataraj's wife in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, Jagan's wife in *The Vendor of Sweets*, Sriram's Granny in *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the ascetic's wife in *A Tiger for Malgudi*, Raman's old aunt and the Bank Accountant's wife in *The Painter of Signs*, Nagaraj's wife Sita and his mother in *The World of Nagaraj*, Grandmother in *Grandmother's Tale*. All these female characters are designed as the bodyguard of 'Custom and Reason' who judge what is morally right or wrong. In such a traditional - bound in which the character is placed, the middle class concept of women as second to man holds sway. Hence woman is condemned to the everlasting slavery of domestic boring task, suffering and breeding of children, dedication dutifulness towards her husband who delight in the unchallengeable command and rule over her as one does in case of one's household commodities. They are nothing more than a shadow of their male counterpart. The slightest contravention of the accepted social principle of honesty and decency creates a number of problems to them whereas man enjoys a relatively free life not restricted by anyone. Their conduct and behaviour are free from boundations. Women as wives, mothers, aunts and grannies largely portrayed the passive feminine. They are mostly not named, known by their family relationships.

The presentation of women characters in Narayan's novels has been one of the consistent concern of Narayan. His novels from beginning to the latest published one, *Grand Mother's Tale* written over a period

of more than fifty years provide an in-exhaustible and variety of female characters. These female protagonists are distinctive by a number of shades and hues. The characteristic of Narayan's description of women is more appealing as great achievement of his creative sensibility. All the characters are depicted and arranged against the common background of Narayan's fictional town Malgudi. Through his fictional town Malgudi Narayan has presented the Indian culture and society. His sincerity, dedication and detached perception of people and their circumstances have nicely contributed to his artistic achievement of producing such an excellent female characters. In his art of creative writing, his main emphasis lies on the depiction of a character whether male or female. He says, "My focus is all on character. If his personality comes alive, the rest is easy for me." (Wolseley, 274)

The other class of Narayan's memorable women characters are Shanta Bai of *The Dark Room*, Shanti of *Mr. Sampath*, Bharti of *Waiting for the Mahatma*, Rosie of *The Guide*, Rangī of *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, Grace of *The Vendor of Sweets*, Daisy of *The Painter of Signs*, Roja of the *Talkative Man*. This class of the female characters is also present in almost all the novels of Narayan including the latest one *Grand Mother's Tale*. In contrast to traditional characters, the modern set of female characters of R.K. Narayan's novels are known by their relationship with men. Such relationship is subtle and varied. These women are further known by the characteristic of modern civilization which cling to them as dangerous endowments. They simultaneously electrify their environments by the enthusiasm and desires they show for life and independence. The hypnotism of modernity outweighs their insert desire to follow tradition. In the early novels the character of women are depicted just as they were in the pre-independence era. Alteration and disagreement of tradition and modernism is visible in the novels of the middle phase. In his later novels modernism has finally enslaved Malgudi and its people shaken the roots of tradition. The alteration of Narayan's women from Savitri of *The Dark Room* to Daisy of *The Painter of Signs* 'fortifies foregoing' statements.

The heroines of Narayan's novels are weak and fragile. He himself has accepted this fact in his interview with Onlooker. He finds women strong and forbearing. Their life is directed by rules and regulations and they are basically clearheaded. Narayan could detect through his insight in human beings that men have a tendency to fumble and they are usually uncertain. He found women more conventional than men. He developed minor characters in the course of progress of the story as he had said in his interview with W.E. Walsely. There are a variety of minor characters who are supportive and adjusting in the development of the protagonists character and at period of time they appear as important and attractive as the main characters. Some of them are Ponni, Mari, Gangu and Janamma in *The Dark Room*, Susila, Kailas and Mohan in *The Bachelor of Arts*, Ravi and the house owner in *Mr. Sampath*, Rangī, Sastri, Sen, the Nehru - baiting journalists in *The Man-Eater of Malgudi*, Dr. Krishnan in 'Second Opinion' and Captain's wife Rita in *A Tiger For Malgudi*, Grace in *The Vendor of Sweets*, Charu and Saroja in *The World of Nagaraj*. These are all memorable characters of flesh and blood, of virtues and vices, as real as their counterparts in real life. Narayan uses both common and unique personalities who are based on culturally convincing traditional images but he, as Raji Narasimhan states, "Provides the best illustration of the first type (perennials). Essentially, almost all his characters are re-creation of one basic character : a basic Narayan character what prevents this from polling in his ever-fresh enthusiasm for the revived character, a genuine and quiet, unaffected liking for him. But apart from these re-creations of a basic figure there are some who appear as Staccato. They are left untouched and apparently, are considered plastic enough by the author to blend into the particular mood and situation." (Narasimhan, 101) She is partially right in her statement that apart from the recreations of a basic figure some staccato figures are left untouched. The point is clear that they also influence the basic character in many ways. And if they are not integrated in the plot as a logical integration, it is because they seem to appear almost on time where their presence is necessary. The grandmother and the adjournment lawyer are such figures in most of his novels. And one of the most important characters Malgudi that has perpetuated in all the novels and short stories so far. Professor K.R.S. Iyengar correctly suggests that it would be - interesting to advance the theory that Malgudi is the real hero of the novels and the many short stories, that underneath the seeming change and the human drama there is something - the 'soul' of the place? - that defies or embraces, all change and is triumphantly and unalterably itself." (Iyengar, 363)

Apart from these chief characters, there are equally a variety of minor characters in Narayan's novels. It is obvious that Narayan has depicted a large variety of excellent characters who emerges from the soil of south India and in course of their knowledge and experience develop a sense of belonging to the whole humanity. They are amalgamation of virtue and vices as all human beings are.

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